

LA MEMORIA, LA VERDAD, LA JUSTICIA, LA EXPERANZA Y LA RECONCILIACIÓN

• SARAH TEREZIA OROSZ

At the exhumation, there were fewer tears than I thought. People seemed intent on getting the work done and trying to identify the remains. For afterward, all of the remains would go to the lab in Guatemala City while the families wait. It takes a lot of work to positively identify the remains. Anthropologists interview the families about past injuries — 20 years later trying to remember what teeth a family member had — and other things that might give positive identity. Eventually, the remains are brought home.

I spent five months in Guatemala as an international observer, living in communities with witnesses planning to give testimony against two dictatorial regimes. I became friends with survivors of horrifying violence that happened as a direct result of U.S. foreign policies. Twice, we attended funeral ceremonies in communities where the remains were finally being returned. They had ceremonies for three days and two nights. There, the families cried. Prayed and cried, prayed and cried.

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When the 13 coffins first arrived, they took all the bones and clothes out of the boxes. Some buried them with the clothes they had died in, but many put in brand-new shirts, pants and shoes, placing them next to the bones in the coffins. They put jewelry, bowls and other little things into the graves. They wrapped the skulls carefully in scarves. One man danced with the coffin of his dead wife. Another woman danced with the skull of her husband wrapped in the scarf. It was bittersweet for the community to

have the remains, for them to finally have something to bury, a place to put candles and flowers, a place to mourn.

There are so many exhumations that are still waiting to take place that the forensic anthropologists are incredibly backed up in Guatemala City with all lab work. They were going to start a big one in the area where I was working, but I have heard that they had to cancel it because the anthropologists have received so many death threats from people who want to keep the past a secret. It is on the grounds of a bunch of soccer fields and a school that are near where the army base was during the conflict. I have heard guesses of anywhere from a few hundred to thousands of bodies that they expect to find there. I look at the place where the children play soccer every Sunday, thinking of murdered bodies under their feet.

Nearby that same field is a “model village” where the people of Rio Negro moved to after their lands were destroyed by the dam. The community’s objections to the dam project (a project sponsored by the World Bank) and its destruction of the people’s lands is the main reason why they were massacred. On Feb. 13, 1982, about 70 men were taken from Rio Negro and massacred. Many of the men in the community fled to the hills, hoping that the women and children would be safe in the community. Exactly one month later, 70 women and 107 children were massacred in the same community. Eighteen children were taken as slaves to a nearby village. They weren’t freed until two and half years later. After the massacre, the survivors hid in the hills for more than two years, but finally gave up and surrendered to the army. They were put in the “model village,” designed by the government to keep them under military control. People say that when they arrived, they had to wash blood off of the walls of their new homes. Many people would like to leave, but they do not have the money or land to start over somewhere else.

The people spent years unable to speak out, knowing they would be killed if they said anything. The witnesses I accompanied now struggled to tell their stories so that the truth would be heard. Many said they are fighting so that the violence will not return to their children.

“We are speaking for our families,” said one witness.

On Oct. 21, 1981, her sister-in-law, uncle and cousin were captured, tortured, burned and buried. Civil patrols ambushed the village, burned the houses, tied up the people and killed two women. In November, they came to her house looking for her father, but he had fled with all of the other men. They demanded to be shown where the men were hidden. They later found

two of the men and killed them. The next July, soldiers killed 26 people, 11 of whom were her family. All of her brothers and sisters were killed. All of the animals were taken. She had gone down to the market in the main town and when she came back she could not find anyone. Five days later, they went to see the grave and found dogs eating the remains.

That September, she went down to the market again and a man from a nearby village reported her to the soldiers. She was captured and taken to the army camp, imprisoned with her hands tied behind her back for 25 days. The soldiers raped the women and forced fruit skins into the mouths of the men, telling them that they were dirty and deserved it. When the soldiers left, the people had nothing. Their houses and crops had been burned, their animals killed, everything destroyed.

I do not know the story of everyone we visit. They all have suffered and witnessed insane violence. In one village, a chapel was built on the spot where a house used to be, where many of the community members were tortured and burned alive during the massacre.

Underneath the chapel rests the remains of those who were killed. Inside the church is a list of all the names of the dead, as well as drawings of the massacre. Almost all of the children in the town were killed. The drawings depict children dripping with blood, bombs falling on the town. It was common practice for the army to torture children in front of their parents, to rip out the fingernails of babies. Pregnant women had their babies cut out of their stomachs, and there were systemic sexual mutilations such as the cutting off of breasts.

When one of the women in that community shared her story with me, she said that whenever she is in the chapel, she cries. She asked me if I know what a child's scream sounds like, the sound of a child being tortured, being burned alive. She and her husband and their 15-day-old baby fled to the hills, but were close enough to still hear the screams. Her milk dried up from the shock and the baby barely survived. She said that when she goes to the chapel she cries, and when her children ask her why, she says it's because it's not a chapel, it's a house ... it's not a chapel, it's a house ... it's not a chapel, it's a house ...

A monument in one village reads (translated from Spanish):

You cannot cover the sun with only one finger. On Jan. 8, 1982, a group of the Guatemalan army, together with the civil patrols

of Xococ, judicials and the face of the dog Gerardo Garcia arrived in the village of Chichupac, where they met with the people and gave gifts to the children, after which they began to kill the 32 defenseless campesinos, within which they killed leaders and catechists who watched over the good of the community. Some were tortured in the clinic and others were taken to another place close to the community to be killed. We want justice for those responsible; we demand reparations for the victims of the violence of the village of Chichupac.

At the funeral we went to, I watched in disbelief as the procession approached the grave and the Mayan priest began to bless it. I watched in disbelief as they began to lower the small boxes into the hole in a row, these tiny boxes that somehow contained a person inside, still not comprehending what I was seeing. But then I heard the sound of crying begin and I looked up at the women lining up along the grave. The quiet crying turned to wailing, some sinking to their knees, grief in their eyes, I wanted to look away but they held me frozen. My own tears began as I looked back at the boxes, listening to the sounds of their grief, and for me those boxes began to contain life, life ended too soon, life taken violently, the lives of brothers, fathers, sons, uncles that appeared so unnaturally contained in those tiny boxes.

“They died like animals because we were not able to do anything, unable to complain to the authorities because the authorities committed the crime,” said a witness.

“We speak out now so that this violence will never return again, will not happen to our children. Thank you for listening to our story.”